

*The Pleasant Nights* by Giovan Francesco Straparola. Edited and translated by Suzanne Magnanini. The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe: The Toronto Series, 40. Toronto, ON: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies; Iter, 2015. Pp. xxiii+501. ISBN: 9780866985369.

First published in Venice in two volumes in 1550 and 1553, *The Pleasant Nights* (*Le Piacevoli Notti*) recounts thirteen nights at the Carnival of Venice. Much like its predecessor, Boccaccio's *Decameron*, it is a frame story. Straparola's work consists of tales told at the palace of Princess Lucretia at Murano in order to pass the time, and similar to Boccaccio, he dedicates the work to "pleasant and lovely ladies." Each night's stories exhibit a wide variety of forms: novelle such as were found in the *Decameron*, magical tales, and translations from Girolamo Morlini's Latin *Novellae* (1520). An added feature for each tale is an enigma or riddle, often taken from earlier sources. *The Pleasant Nights* are considered one of the earliest collections of European vernacular fairy tales. Not much, however, is known about Straparola. Even his name, which means "one who talks too much," gives us no information. As a result, we only know him from the two works that he published (*The Pleasant Nights* and a *Canzoniere*). Although his work was immensely popular in its time, it is only in the last twenty years or so that there has been a new interest in this work.

The publication of Magnanini's translation comes three years after Don Beecher's edition of *The Pleasant Nights*, in which he provides thorough commentaries on each story, a well-researched introduction, and several appendices on provenances, folktale types, and illustrations from various editions. Beecher, however, uses what has been the standard translation, that of W. G. Waters, first published in 1894. Beecher edited and retranslated some of the more egregious problems of the Waters translation, but his basic text is Waters's version. It is thus a delight to come upon Magnanini's new translation, using the excellent 2000 Italian edition of Donato Pirovano as its basis. Wanting to make *The Pleasant Nights* accessible to a wide audience, Magnanini has produced a more readable translation. Its English is more fluid and contemporary and is more faithful to the Italian. In a sense, it leaves out the flowery language that Waters uses. For example, in the first story, after his father dies, the character Salardo "determinò di prendere moglie." Waters translates this phrase as "he went in hot pursuit of a wife," whereas Magnanini sticks closer to the original with "he resolved to take a wife." We are thus able to read the text without the flowery Victorian overtones often found in Waters. Another strength of her edition is that she allows us to compare her translation of the riddles (which are particularly interesting) to the Italian, which she puts in footnotes. Beecher's edition does not have this feature.

Magnanini's introduction is particularly strong. She introduces the reader to the history of the work and its social setting. Stories such as those found in *The Pleasant Nights*, she notes, were popular in sixteenth-century Venice, the center of the book trade.

Most importantly, she traces its relationship to the fairy tale tradition, which, she points out, has deep ties to women and femininity. She explains that Straparola allows his female narrators to carry on a "querelle des femmes" with their male companions. Taking place during Carnival, a time when gender roles are blurred, they are able to challenge patriarchal authority. She argues that he uses "feminized fairy tales" to give the novella tradition "literary legitimacy." Using the example of one of the most interesting stories in the collection, that of a hermaphrodite, she shows how he introduces "a truly other voice, a voice that, although feminized, is never completely female" (2). Magnanini explains that Straparola's storytellers, all women, are educated: they know Latin and have read Boccaccio and Petrarch.

Putting Straparola's work in the wider European tradition, Magnanini explains that nearly all of the fairy tales published in Italy in this period were written by men. The stories inside the frame have a female narrator, but they are not the authors of such collections. The situation was far different in France, she notes. Straparola was used as a model in the 1690s by French women, who credit *The Pleasant Nights* as the source of their own stories. Magnanini asks the question of why French women were fascinated by this work when Italian female writers largely ignored the genre. She contends that Straparola stresses the French image of sophisticated women rather than "the domain of old crones spinning tales around the hearth" (7). Although his women are placed within a domestic space, they tell lively, intelligent stories, which presents a kind of ambiguity, she notes, in what they speak about and the social values they are supposed to follow. In the end, despite the challenge to patriarchal authority, traditional female values win out. Although the women have the opportunity to denounce misogyny, they accept gender roles.

Magnanini's intent is to show "how Straparola's particular engagement of issues of gender shapes the tradition of the literary fairy tale inside and outside of Italy" (8). In focusing on the ways in which he highlights women, she has significantly added to our understanding of fairy tales, and, in particular, of an author who has not been widely read. Its fluid translation makes it an easily accessible text for teaching, and its insightful introduction will be of great assistance to all scholars working in this field.

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